

THE MATRIFOCAL FAMILY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO MENTAL RETARDATION

HELEN MARIE LUND

Department of Sociology, Emory University
Department of Sociology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia
and

MELVIN E. KAUFMAN

Department of Studies in Behavioural Disabilities, University of Wisconsin

A social psychological study of indigent primigravid pregnancy (first pregnancy) is presently being conducted at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, U. S. A. This research is focused upon the attitudinal and behavioural aspects of pregnancy with special emphasis upon its relationship to mortality and morbidity in infants. Grady Hospital is a very large well equipped integrated public hospital which serves all of Atlanta's very poor Negroes. In 1965, approximately 70% of all Negro infants whose mothers lived in greater Atlanta were delivered at this hospital. This circumstance provides an opportunity to study the patients and their families in great detail from the time of pregnancy through the developmental years; and accurate social and psychological information thus may be obtained.

This paper investigates the attitudes generated within the matrifocal family structure. This family structure lends itself to the development of mental retardation by creating conditions in which a disproportionate amount of prematurity and reproductive wastage occurs. Reproductive wastage is a general term which refers to the various forms of fetal and infant mortality and morbidity. Rates of reproductive wastage vary significantly among sub-groups in our society.

Related Studies

Before presenting the findings, which are drawn from the hospital records, it is appropriate to cite some of the results of related research. Studies of economically underprivileged Negroes delivering out of wedlock conclude that certain social psychological variables effect the outcome of pregnancy. Yankauer, Goss and Romeo, (1953) state that the failure to seek prenatal care in the case of the socially and economically underprivileged, is an outward manifestation of rejection and a loss of sense of personal dignity. The attitudes which the pregnant mother has toward herself may result in neglect of her health and nutritional state. Such self perceptions on the part of the primigravid Negro appear to produce an effect on the developing fetus.

A significant relationship between prematurity and mental retardation, cerebral palsy and epilepsy is reported by Pasamanick (1951). In addition a higher rate of premature births and neonatal deaths is observed among lower class Negroes on welfare who deliver out of wedlock (Yankauer, Goss and Romeo, 1953). A similar relationship between high rates of premature births and lower class Negroes is reported in a Baltimore study (Knoblock and Pasamanick, 1966). Significantly more histories of prematurity are found among Negro children who eventually developed retardation. It is also observed that women delivering very early or very late in their reproductive years have a significantly higher risk of producing mentally defective children.

Increasing birth order also increases risk of mental deficiency. Studies by Stein (1967) in New York City describe high rates of prematurity associated with very low social strata. Stein also suggests that malnutrition is a variable which may be

casually related to retardation. However, she agrees that, as with infectious diseases, poor nutritional states cannot be easily dissociated from the non-material aspects of the culture.

Turning to social-psychological studies of the very poor Negro family, one observes that the matrifocal family is a rather unique feature of this culture. Moynihan (1965) in his report on *The Negro Family*, states the matriarchal or matrifocal structure is basic to the "instability" and "disorganisation" observed. Although this family form existed in certain parts of Africa, it is generally believed that separation of men from their wives and children during slavery is one of the causal factors accounting for the presence of the matrifocal family in the United States.

The cultural characteristics of the matrifocal family depict the poor Negro's attempt to adapt to his peculiar urban environment. Lee Rainwater (1966) identified seven factors in this family structure. He states: (1) The peer group's socializing experience is found in the street life. The informal social relations of slum Negroes begin to be highly sexualized during adolescence. (2) Premarital pregnancy is not unusual for the teenaged girl and is accepted in the matrifocal family. The adolescent mother is expected to return to the informal social relations of the street after her baby is born and her mother or grandmother will take the major responsibility for raising her first child. Rainwater believes that it is in the "easy attitudes toward premarital pregnancy" that the matrifocal character of the Negro low class family appears most clearly. (3) It is not necessary to have a man around the house to raise a family. Marriage of most lower-class Negro men and women is eventual, however. The decision is impulsive, based more on "affectional" or expressive ties than instrumental concerns and there is mutual exploitation of each other. (4) The family is matrifocal. The wife makes most decisions and looks to other women relatives for support. The wife's concern with her unemployed husband is not with his lack of fidelity but with his lack of financial support. (5) Marital breakup is the fifth characteristic. This is precipitated by the failure of the male to fill the necessary role of provider. (6) Rainwater's "house of mothers" describes the most extreme form of matrifocal family found in the very poor Negro family. This is a three generation household of mothers consisting of the teenaged mother, her own mother and her grandmother. It is the present authors' observation that often a younger teenaged sister may drop out of school to help care for the new baby. The teenaged mother receives her training in how to run such a household by experiencing her own mother manage without a husband. Similarly she often learns how to run a three generation household because she herself brings a third generation into her home with her first, premarital pregnancy. (7) Rainwater indicates that men tend to disappear in this culture. This contention is supported by Moynihan's census data (1965). Boy friends are not husbands. The function of boyfriends is to beget children and later to appease the sense of isolation and disillusionment of the older mother.

At this point it is necessary to elucidate upon the role assigned to the adult male within the matrifocal family. In the very poor Negro sub-group, the male absents himself from the home primarily because he is unable to make a significant economic contribution to it. His absence leaves a social-psychological void. The adult male in our general society has a dual role—that of husband and father. As husband he supports appropriate maternal behaviour on the part of his wife; as father he reinforces appropriate behaviour in his children and maintains social control. However, in the matrifocal family the adult male, (1) Does not help to form values or set goals for the family, (2) Cannot enhance the role of his wife as mother, (3) Is unable to transmit to the family the values of our society, (4) Lacks the role as social reinforcer and is not an agent of social control for his children.

One way that values are transmitted is through the medium of one's work. Participation in one's community, utilization of clinical and hospital services, and concern for the health of one's family are values of the general society which are linked to work experience. Even in situations where the Negro male is in the home, his work is unskilled and irregular so that he cannot offer status increments to his family.

The very poor Negroes live together in the urban ghettos and develop a culture that maintains itself; both qualitatively and quantitatively. This culture is supported by our general society through imposition of a caste-like barrier toward upward mobility. Likewise, our society usurps other traditional functions of the adult male by providing food, shelter, clothing and hospital care to the family.

Results and Discussion of Hospital Findings

Turning now to information obtained from our hospital data we find that approximately 80% of the obstetric cases are Negro; 25% of these are primigravid cases. The average very poor primigravid patient is 17 years old. She is single and comes for care very late in her pregnancy. A large percentage (90%) of the primigravid group conceive illegitimately; and while some marry, more than half are single at the time of delivery.

In 1965 and 1966, approximately 17% of the births in the primigravid group are classified as premature. Over 60% of Negro births are by women 16 or younger. We also find a high incidence of failure to obtain obstetric care in this population. This is especially true in cases resulting in perinatal mortalities, where only 15% of the women receive some minimal form of medical care prior to birth.

Statistics such as these are not unique to this hospital. In 1965 the state of Georgia reports an overall prematurity rate of 9.7%, with the non-white prematurity rate being 13.77%. It is a reasonable assumption that comparable figures could have been obtained for the rest of the South-Eastern United States.

Conclusions

In investigating the relationship between the matrifocal family structure and the incidence of mental retardation, a number of tentative conclusions may be drawn: Very poor Negro women tend to live in matrifocal families which either support or do not provide strong sanctions against early pregnancy. Lack of parental control permits young girls to become involved in a highly sexualized street life in which there is an apparent absence of concern regarding premarital pregnancy. Delay in using medical services is also associated with lack of sanctions against early pregnancy. Furthermore, there is little awareness of the relationship between the health of the mother and the health of the infant. Early teenage pregnancy and delay in using medical services is related to various forms of reproductive wastage, including retardation. Thus the matrifocal family contributes to a significantly higher incidence of mental retardation.

The writers' thesis is that there are complex psychosocial factors associated with the matrifocal family and that these factors appear to make a significant contribution to the development of certain forms of mental retardation. Psycho-social determinants lead to early and ill-prepared pregnancies, lack of appropriate obstetric care, prematurity, and reproductive wastage. Therefore, matrifocality represents a family structure which is viewed as maladaptive to the demands of the general society. It is associated with intellectual deficit in the offspring. Furthermore it appears that our general society tends to perpetuate this family structure.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to express their appreciation to Dr. William L. Graves, Associate, Medical Sociology, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A., for his co-operation and assistance in the preparation of this paper.

This study was supported in part by a United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare research grant 305-01-67 (T), Division of Chronic Diseases.

References:

- Knobloch, Hilda and Pasamanick, B. (1966). Prospective Studies on the Epidemiology of Reproductive Casualty: Methods, Findings, and Some Implications. *Merrill-Palmer Quart. on Behav. and Develop.* 12, 27-43.
- Moynihan, D. P. (1965). *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Office of Policy Planning and Res. U.S. Dept. of Labor.
- Pasamanick, B. (1951). Anticonvulsant Drug Therapy of Behavior Problem Children with Abnormal Electro-encephalograms. *Amer. Med. Ass. Arch. Neorolog. Psychiat.*, 59, 3.
- Rainwater, L. (1966). Crucible of Identity: The Negro Lower-Class Family. *Deadalus, Winter*, 172-216.
- Stein, Z. (1967). Socio-Medical Factors Related to Mild Mental Retardation: An Epidemiological Approach. Paper read at Amer. Ass. Ment. Defic., Denver, Colorado, U.S.A., June, 1967.
- Yankauer, A., Goss, K. G. and Romeo, S. M. (1953). An Evaluation of Parental Care and its Relationship to Social Class and Social Disorganisation. *Amer. J. Pub. Hlth.*, 43, 1001-1010.